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## ON THE DESIRE TO SMASH TIME

NECROPOLITICS APOCALYPSE, BATAILLE, CAPITALISM, DESIRE, THE END, TIME

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### **On the desire to smash time**

Why is life *confined* to its biological temporality (work time, the cycle of expenditure and recuperation, exhaustion and consumption) unliveable in the strict sense? Why can we not stay within it without wanting to break it? We have no choice but to admit this: we live a double life. Behind the biological desire for multiplication hides a completely different drive. This one does

not aspire to movement. It absolutely refuses (without reason, by a categorical imperative) the cycle of biological life and tries to substitute for it, *in heterogeneous instants to the “every day” temporality of consciousness*, an unproductive expenditure which breaks with the time of profitability (of urgency, of acceleration, of the coercive present of value). There is a radical impotence in our society to take up this heterogeneous temporality within that of profitability.

*It is in profound life, in the “sluggish backwaters” of biology, that we must seek, in a structure infinitely SLOWER than history, which if it is not eternal, is the origin of the truly revolutionary “enough is enough”.* Where biological life ceaselessly aspires to reproduce itself and extend itself in work, in production, to recover itself in reward, rest and social interaction, this other life, the accursed life, wants to squander the efforts of the first and spend without limit: its places are friendship, real love, religion, but also riots, uprisings, a certain philosophical thought, a certain “literature”. Its “objective” is the dissolution of any movement. Is it not this life, *deep down*, that we consider *truly alive*, in which we find the very essence of vitality? Biological life may well be entirely satisfied... there still remains this inassimilable, heterogeneous “remainder”: the desire for ecstasy, gift, unproductive expenditure, destruction, the desire to escape movement – the desire for an alterity which exceeds being and its kingdom (acceleration, identity, the *sad* security of an SUV). It is no doubt necessary to suffer from great distress to affirm that this life is not life *as such* and to debase it and equate it to a death drive. This kind of affirmation captures the truth well, the irreducible alterity of true life with regard to the biological cycle that capitalism *exhausts* and transforms into death. It does not however allow us to understand to what extent our “life”, under its busy, *serious* exterior, is dismal, homogeneous, and hollow. It is *our* “life” that stinks of death. Our Western societies possess a real power of devitalisation; the deadly power to pile up corpses in the underground, to line up ghosts in the open – to smash, by laughable violence, all that here and there still wishes to affirm its own power, the very one that politics and economics must constantly repress.

We are torn between a desire for subsistence, for conservation, which Capital exacerbates and exasperates to the point of anxiety, and a desire for presence, but a *negative* presence felt or understood, of eternity, that is to say, a permanent interruption – not the restoration of harmony but its destruction.

To those who say that “capitalism, a force of progress *despite everything*, has cut poverty in half, has favoured feminism, freedom of expression, of movement, of sexual fulfilment, and more generally, free *social relations*, etc.”, it must be answered that capitalism, in itself, designates nothing but the self-valorisation of value, a movement that all the readers of *Capital* – and there are few of them on television – know. In itself, capital is only a power of *indefinite* accumulation, disconnected from life, nature, the world (the one we live in), from politics and freedom, as well as equality. It has no values: it is the movement by which exchange value valorises itself by first excluding all others, including human dignity (the absolute value of the person), including real freedom and equality. To claim that capitalism is *responsible* (and one is forced to hear this word) for the reduction of poverty in the world, for the development of freedom of expression or even feminism makes no sense. All of these examples of “progress”, if they really exist within

capitalism, are so many concessions that other forces have either *wrested* from it, or *appeared* to it as so many opportunities to pursue its one and only task: indefinite self-valorisation of market value. In this sense, feminism is a market; freedom: a legitimacy; the equalisation of conditions: a “social contract”; the reduction of poverty: a semblance of humanity. One could go on indefinitely. This view, which bestows upon capitalism a *moral and human* force of progress, like a superstition, or more precisely, an alienation which places, behind a blind and stupid *force* (which is none other than greed, the *chrematistic*, as Aristotle refers to it, deployed as a rational principle capable of disciplining the whole of life), an authentic subject in the moral sense of the term, must therefore be completely rejected. Capitalism possesses no conscience: it is pure frenetic movement of valorisation of value; it is the *stupid* tautology of a biological life which secures its surplus by reinvesting it indefinitely; it is where the frugal person who hoards, who tries to collect her/his time in a safe, discovers that s/he is mortal, that time *passes*. In the fortune (*fortuna, ousia*) of the capitalist, whose Puritan origin on the one hand, and on the other, its metaphysical origin, it should not be forgotten that it is the *desire* for the presence of life which finds a deep satisfaction, but in an illusory and alienated manner: life ceaselessly seeks to break its own animal restlessness and confine itself within being, in presence. However, a certain presence solidifies itself there where everything else, *precisely because the present must be solidified*, accelerates, liquefies: the presence of value remains immobile, while the social bond, bodies, religion, love and above all friendship, are swept away by the river of becoming. This river: the icy waters of the selfish calculation of which Marx speaks, and which must be conceived of as an unstoppable flow at the service of the closed, tightly compartmentalised and calm – immobile – reservoir of value. You have to run: fast, fast, life is pressing, you have to take advantage of it. The small gleams of women and men move and dance while the student, the unemployed, the “young”, languish in their garrets, their faces entirely turned towards the future, drinking from the emptiness of the horizon, incapable of inhabiting a present. They are worried: they live a *frustrated* biological life. Presence is bought, and it is expensive: a little stability is “lucky, it calls for sacrifices”... to be able in the end, assuming that there is still a little vitality in us, to see ourselves fail in boredom. If the river of “icy waters of selfish calculation” starts from a reservoir, a pool, it flows into a parched sea, full of corpses, a pit of disappointments filled with midlife crises, multiple incest, suicides and, in the worst cases, blissful satisfaction doped up with anti-depressants... while waiting for death.

And hence, this time that they endeavour to impose on us, and that soon perhaps no one will be able to even conceive of, because of the inability to ob-jectivise it, is that of a pure present – of a *being* or of a state of being which, as Parmenides wrote, is only *now*, where by *now* we must understand the eternal return of the same empty moment, without quality, adding itself to the others only as an *augmentation*. The time of accumulation, that is what is imposed on us. The drama is not that the “relation to time” thus designated erases the others, erases “real” time, so-called “authentic” time. The drama, or rather the tragedy, comes from the fact that life *only shows itself* through time, only makes itself manifest in a temporality. To thus reduce time to the homogeneous and empty time of progressive (pseudo-progressive) efficiency and yield is to prohibit life and its desire for presence from appearing to itself other than in the form, altogether

animal (because restless, anxious), of the desire for multiplication. Capitalism *accumulates the time* of “living labour”, the time that it quantifies and transforms into fixed givens – technical, financial, digital and market capital. It is the retention that calms the anxiety (protection) of the present. It is the *immoral* and placid calm of biological life which drinks from the worry of others – it is the abject reign of the present (which takes the form of death) over billions of lives which ceaselessly *fail* to hold onto to themselves, and therefore desire *hitherto only that*, themselves. It took more than idiots to sell SUVs. Anxious living beings were needed. To say that capitalism is an enormous power that generates *anxiety* is fitting in this sense: we “only aspire to live” – to be happy, to find love and all the other nonsense of the kind – which under the pressure of an ever growing disquiet, that of the present itself of value which makes everything flow, which renders everything fluid, in order to maintain ourselves “in being”, in other words, “to be”. Plotinus desired the beyond of being (*epekeina tes ousias*). Doubtless religions have aspired to it. We – us – have nothing more than “being”, ontology made world, a world without hope, a dead world, without water, without air (Beckett). Against this life that capital *creates* for us, a biological life that secretes its own metaphysics – that of being, of confiscated presence –, only vitality (*aion*) can resist.

Acceleration, ultra-subjectivisation, deprivation of the world, consumer society, the new spirit of capitalism, surveillance capitalism, neoliberalism; they must be thought of as a *katechon*, Saint Paul would say (and is not Paul close to us, even for the worse?). They must be thought of as a power that retains the other temporality, that of *living* life, that of ancient *vitality*, of the name of *aion*. The *katechon* retains with all of its animal, biological forces, the coming of the “messianic interruption” where the homogeneous course of the time of work/capital/metaphysics breaks; it is broken and *abolished* in this rupture. Smashing time: this is what it feels like to break an HSBC window – it is to inaugurate a shared, a *common out-of-time* instant, a suspended moment, beyond or below the usual course of life. The rioter smashes, or rather tries to smash, the time that is given to her/him – this spatialised, ungenerous, foul time that s/he interrupts. Smashing time: the inconceivable for the dead who govern us, whose *life* has for a long time been identified with biological life, gathered together within it – which renders them, I dare say, explicable by science, by statistics and even admirably so, whereas they only wrench away a “good, continuously”, while indifferent to the living who here and there, remain. Smashing time: against any rupture, any breaking away, the present of capital *stretches* and stirs itself, and in order to maintain itself, to avoid its own anxiousness, it diffuses anxiety through the whole of society, producing in-dividuals, indebted women and men, stupid neurotics, about whom everything that can be said is reducible to this: they are, they go, they pass, they are (they die). There is in the time of capital, as we experience it *now*, a power of the restraint of restraint itself, of the interruption of interruption by *acceleration*. Therein is condensed the whole paradox that everyone, today, has the privilege of suffering in their flesh. Dragged towards the present, pulled towards the “nothing new” (Beckett), pulled towards a faded floor and yet pulled, shaken, tossed about. Because the condition of the “nothing new” is that everything changes, that everyone drags themselves from street to street, from work place to work place, thrown about to be thrown again, simulating their *joy*. This is a flexibility that tastes of death: mobility is not life, only Henri

Bergson believed it to be so. Life, real life, resides in the *interruption* of mobility: it is the sweeping away, the cut, the break – it is the interruption, the destruction. True life only arises in the *frenetic madness of a shattering*, it only shows itself in the crack that runs through the time of “men”, which breaks it, bends it and disassembles it. True life is *eternity*, non-time, if time is reduced to what we have wanted to do with it for at least 2500 years: an indefinite series of *nows* that we would have to preserve in order *to be*. Before the *katechon*, one must never count on biological life. *One must not count*, but rather live in a death rattle, love in a death rattle (Georges Bataille), in the alterity of a moment when nothing matters anymore and when the time of women and men bursts. One has to *burst, explode, shatter*, by thought, by friendship, or by “smashing things up”, or by the love of *ugliness* – it is necessary to shatter time, that is to say to try still to live a little despite everything.

It then becomes possible to move on to the second moment of the response: if capitalism has *made concessions in the past*, and no doubt still does, can we really expect it to multiply them in the future? For we have a first serious obstacle: the “ecological crisis” (obviously linked to Western metaphysics, of which capitalism is only a moment, a false moment, of the real world where *being and thought* become equivalent in the Ikea table). Following this, another problem emerges, tied to the very *katechon* of capital: how to endure indebtedness? How can we still maintain a minimum of the post-war social contract, and not fall too obviously into authoritarianism? It is not certain that capitalism can overcome this contradiction by which it *accumulates* in order to *preserve* itself (ecological crisis: this would be the tragic outcome, that is to say, it is not overcome, there is no *Aufhebung*); and this other contradiction by which it buys time with time (indebtedness which leads to austerity, guilt, precariousness, a constant unemployment rate, which in turn lead to indebtedness). Do we underestimate the power of recovery and adaptation of capitalism? We cannot. Can we see in the “covid crisis” *that which* will overcome capitalism? Again, we cannot. It is only permissible to ask whether, in this possibility still open to us of *living* by destituting the time of rent, of profit, if we should not see our *opportunity* to affirm, again, what we are, we the billions of *excluded*. It is that within the seasoned militant to the author of this text, passing through the innumerable and *different* others who do not always fully grasp the extent of their strength, the same vitality (*aion*) beats. In this, there is not hope, not the foolish glimmer of a horizon we do not want – but the *occasional* power/potential to smash time.

It is not just a question of claiming that “capitalism” maintains a continual hunger to sell its goods. This would be a truism that would not take us very far as such. It is rather necessary to take the measure of an economic system which confines beings, by an ambiguous governance, in a form of life where hunger, and not *desire* or love, becomes the principle of almost all psychic and physical activity. The paradigm is the *jogger*, prisoner of the cyclical temporality of hunger where recuperation follows spending, and who must constantly maintain – in order not to sink into *depression* – his own wheel of Ixion, his own torture of Sisyphus. As Hannah Arendt wrote, we “are confronted with ... the prospect of a society of labourers without labour”. The terrifying power of economics is not primarily due to its quantification of reality, any more than to its epistemological contempt for all other “disciplines”. The economy draws its power from its

governance over life, which it walls up in a form that is not only degrading, pseudo-animal-like and cowardly – but above all *weak*. It is a life diminished. We live a life reduced to a qualification that barely goes beyond what the Greeks called “living” [*zoe*]. Between pure life, as seen in the marine lung which exhales and inhales, inhales and exhales, and *nothing more* – between pure life and economic life, there is only *individuality*. We are individualised marine lungs, in the extreme: *me, personally*, I like, I want, I think, I buy, I play, I drink, I vote, I fuck and I reason, trying to fill the barrel as best as possible – it is me personally who empties and fills me, expends me and relaxes me in philosophy, water polo, jogging, love, art, jerking off and reading. Our hunger is totalitarian. But it does not deploy or require much: behind the billboard for our person, our travels, our tastes, our CV and our actions, there is only a poor little common thread which has the name “life” and which Plato compared to a bird that defecates and eats at the same time. Living outside of this principle becomes so complicated that the very idea of a “useless” activity, that is, an activity *that neither regenerates nor expends life force*, disgusts us. What Bataille called “unproductive expenditure”, as practiced by the peoples colonised by Europe, has become *impossible* – the impossible even. To live in the sovereign moment of a loss of self, this is now the impossible: we refuse to qualify our life in any way other than zoologically. Any other claim becomes so suspect that one feels fascist at the mere idea. But the *real* fascism which abounds, that rises up, lifts itself up precisely from this soil to which the economic principle has long since reduced our qualified (human) lives. The soil and earth, race, origins, the colour of one’s face are values only for someone who has lost everything else – who has lost his sovereignty over his own life, his power to *exist*, while suspended over a Sisyphean form of life. Fascism only appears as a solution from the hell of liberalism. For how else can we situate a regime of existence which places *humanity* in the circular movement of an infinite accumulation – Marx defined Capital as the tautological self-valorisation of economic value – in the cycle of expenditure and recovery or, what comes to the same thing, in growth? The dispossession of our qualities by the economy makes history itself a cycle: the old horrors can always reappear as long as the only proposal that one person can make to another is *either chaos or “life”*.

The economy as governance imposes an infinite movement – that Condillac called “indefinite progress” and Benjamin catastrophe – on life. This identity of movement and life has penetrated us to such a degree that we spontaneously tend to dismiss as equivalent to the nothingness of death everything that relates to rest or simple subsistence. An idle, lazy woman or man, unconcerned with increasing their own power (to act, to think, etc.), or to put it bluntly, *unconcerned with increasing their human capital*, seems to us to lead the life of a stone, or a plant – s/he is a vegetable. We can no longer understand the meaning of the desire for eternity, which the Greeks attributed to everything that lives under the sky: when Aristotle affirms that everything that moves tends to immobility, to join the first unmoved mover; when Plato describes life as an *eis ousian genesis*, a “becoming towards being”; or when Epicurus explains that the desire for happiness, as *ataraxia* (absence of troubles, calm), is “connatural to all living beings”, we do not understand, or rather see “in there” a suspicious desire for death – a “will to death”, said pseudo-Nietzsche. Yet is it not to move in the direction of life to desire eternity, the interruption of movement and even, to say it yet again, presence, being, but not extorted, not

confiscated by Capital, this great Vampire? Freud established that a “constancy principle” governs the living being, eager to stabilise its excitement by reaching a state of equilibrium. He assimilated this principle to a “Nirvana principle” and concluded, from the fact that all the activities of the living converge towards presence – constancy –, to an *end* common to the life drive and the death drive. Posed in these terms, the sexuality which ensures the reproduction of the species, and therefore its permanence through time, came dangerously close to the work of Thanatos, of which depressives, alcoholics, neurotics and other “pathological cases” who self-destruct to achieve the *end* of life are accustomed. Whether the living destroy or create, whether they develop unities or work to dissolve them, in both cases they aim at the end of life, the hidden goal of instincts: presence.

Certainly more astute than pseudo-Nietzsche, Freud refused to identify the Parmenidean presence with death, as well as to reduce it to a *depressive* life, a life in “distress”, which gave way to its own will to accumulate power. If the living, as Freud remarked, aims for presence in all its activities, the “death drive” and “life drive” are only two variations of the same fundamental tendency: the depressive who self-destructs agrees with the fertile father of a family in the end – both want constancy, its calm, its fullness. Weakening oneself or working to *support* oneself are two ways of satisfying oneself, of being, not happy, no “never,” said Beckett, “but of wishing that the night never ends, or that the day returns, which makes men say, Come on, life is passing, you have to enjoy it”. In this sense, Freud remains Greek, much more than pseudo-Nietzsche whose “will to power” and “what does not kill me makes me stronger” situates, *according to the most obvious reading today*, life in the indefinite accumulation of vital power, in the ceaseless movement of self-augmentation. With life thus conceived, everything is ready to house vitality in the acceleration of capitalist globalisation: fast and furious is the West’s echo of (pseudo-)Nietzsche. Hence the seduction that this thinker, however execrable to many leftists, exerts on us *immediately* (or almost): we *agree*, and what he says (again summed up in this way) seems to be well known.

However, we must examine whether our era is not violently mistaken in taking for granted that life, real life, is to be found in the indefinite movement of self-valorisation. More than an error, there is undoubtedly in this even the symptom of a reduction of our vitality to just one of its forms: the *movement* of conservation and its double, growth (reproduction). Life can only appear as a will to power *in this sense of self-accumulation and growth* to a life itself reduced, dispossessed of the presence of a *break, a rupture*. Pseudo-Nietzsche’s “distress” can then be interpreted in another way, no longer as the low point of a weary life, or *quantitatively* fatigued – but as *amputation*. Our reduced lives have indeed been amputated and amputated of a *quality*, of a form. It is in fact, with the economy and the discourse that follows, a form of life that has been captured by storm. Life in presence, eternal life – the life which short-circuits the movement of the apocatastasis of being – this life was excluded from the world of productivity and efficiency. We have confined the living in movement without any longer seeking to satisfy it: we have abandoned the desire to sabotage the race of time for progress towards...

“Progress *towards...*” is a figure of endless movement. In both directions: no goal, no end, and no

end because the goal is lacking. The “end of history”, which Alexandre Kojève identified sometimes with Napoleon, sometimes with the French revolution, sometimes with communism, does not correspond to any “post-modernity” nor to any precise date. It coincides with modernity itself, whose “progress” conceives itself as “indefinite”, as an uninterrupted spurt of novelty giving onto... nothing, or everything, it depends. Proposing indefinite progress as the only horizon is the same as inviting *everyone* to wait for Godot. Since we are modern, we have lived in the time of the end, in the movement of a potentially infinite expectation of which procrastination, in the individual, is only one of the innumerable symptoms. We live *for* tomorrow knowing that tomorrow does not exist.

To bring people to live in the time of the end, it was necessary first to depose that which in them wanted more than the “always more”. The economy was this force of destitution: any heterogeneous claim to the vital movement of growth was concretely destroyed. The Kwakiutl, natives of north-eastern Vancouver Island, had their ritual objects confiscated and some of them were arrested and imprisoned in 1921 by the authorities for having engaged in a *potlatch*. A gift economy, a life *satisfied with unproductive spending* and pure decrease – or squandering – is what is unbearable for Europeans with a reduced life. Any squandering that does not obey the principle of enjoyment, the movement of a *recuperation* that compensates for the expense, or regenerates the force of life, must be annihilated or swallowed up in the dark and abstract lair of the museum. A life which is not *power*, but act or *celebration*, a life which is not exhausted in the enjoyment of its self-movement, such a life has no place in Europe, that is to say almost everywhere.

We are done with *philosophia*. We are fully within self-movement, inertia, and have been for a long time. Has this occurred so that we may satisfy ourselves? Have we sought to establish a paradise here, to live in a non-biological, non-extorted presence, that is to say, a non-troubled presence? *It is the mainstream*. We only want to move, all the time, everywhere, to spend and recharge, to infinity, to grow, to increase. This is why the cyborg awaits us. There will always be someone to say, even locked in their almost fully robotised bunker for 200 years, fed on jelly and virtual sex: “but this is freedom”.

The economy has destroyed our lives so much that we are almost nothing but naked lives; almost.

Of course, there remains the hope that the world will self-destruct quickly enough that a god can still save us. Collapse theorists rush down this path, when they are not repeating, in the ideology of survivalism and *man versus the wild*, the very principle of the economy and its indefinite movement. Unless this god has always been us, and no one has been enlightened enough to understand it and – which no doubt amounts to the same thing – to be it.

“Our concern is not merely to be sinless but to be God”, said Plotinus; merely to be god. The belief that “ancient” thought was gradually swallowed up in the modern can only crash against this sentence, written incidentally, for no apparent reason – without any particular *context*. In it is condensed everything that we must reintegrate: the desire for a beyond of being or, what comes



to the same thing, the desire to be god. This must not be understood as a cult of the person or cloning. To be god *simply* amounts to asserting one's sovereignty over life and one's own logic, the *desire* for multiplication and reproduction. To live in a movement that is not a lack, but a plenitude; to live a life that is not the regulated alternation of boredom and suffering, like Schopenhauer's pendulum; to live from a presence that demands overflow, pure expenditure, without ulterior motive, what Kant called disinterestedness – or, more prosaically, "good will" –, this is undoubtedly a tenable project. We do not ask anyone to live as a victim, as a foolish martyr. We demand nothing in fact. We want to understand and make people understand that in this simple syntagm, being-god, a form of desirable life is manifested, which leads us to embrace the pure movement of life – of a "letting-live" that is not a demeaning "letting- to do" [*laisser-faire*], that is to say, economic life. To be god is to assume paradise *for humanity*, it is to tear the gods from their heavens so as to establish them here, first in you, in us, and then everywhere, to the maximum degree, so that presence and true happiness spread. To be god is, in other words, the watchword of a revolution which interrupts the course of time, the accumulation of catastrophes and inequalities – it is the watchword of a revolution which is a real *sweeping* away. Between the brutal pupil and the insurgent who shoots at clocks, the same desire for eternity runs. Only time today can bring us together, connect spaces, weave together one space and another, Beijing and the Lidl supermarket of Dieulouard, the bodybuilder and the puny body of the geek. Our desire is for happiness in the *here and now*. It is obvious that with this we throw out the *carpe diem* tattoos and other slogans of the world-movement. But presence as a breaking up of the movement that feeds on its own satisfaction in order to continue – the being *on the way*, which is not hunger on the move – requires that one would have no longer to be human at all, to repel it. To affirm one's sovereignty over life, to break the time that fuses, to break everything that resists idleness, solidarity, pure expense, this is the secret desire of our *double* lives, torn between the logic of reproduction and that, irreducible, of the sacrifice, of the gift, of the loss of self which still constitutes our remnant of humanity and culture. To raise ourselves up to this life and to affirm it for and by all, that is the objective.

This objective does not stand before us, on the horizon, in a distance that hope fills with fantasies. This objective coincides with a life in us, *open to the now*, an objective that is discouraged by the impulse of the economy *day by day*, with every hour that passes, over Instagram, TikTok, media-for-idiots, reality TV, family meals, sidewalk chitchat, opinions and other disincentives. To live in a way that is not profitable is a watchword that supposes breaking with what is, not first, but *in the very moment of a sovereign affirmation of life*, with what opposes true presence and exhausts us in the ceaseless movement of a quest which is not ours, which is nobody's. Not embracing the movement, violently breaking free from it and brushing it away, from a tiny island of exteriority – that is the objective.

[1] See: *Time, revolution and historical subjectivity; Shards of time amid spaces of rebellion*.

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Stefan Paulus

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